

# A Constant Lover

By Mendel Kalmenson

"We're sorry, comrades . . ." crackled the voice being broadcast from military headquarters, "there's nothing we can do at this point . . . Prepare for the worst."

The Egyptian army was advancing quickly on their isolated brigade. The backup they so desperately needed would not be coming.

Within the hour they would all die. How to spend their last moments?

One soldier asked for permission to speak.

"Have faith in G-d," he cried with his entire being, as only one who stares death in the eye can.

"Even if a sharp sword presses on your neck, don't despair of G-d's mercy!"<sup>1</sup>

His words penetrated their hearts. "There are no atheists in a foxhole," goes the saying. And they were deep in a foxhole.

One of the soldiers, experiencing faith for the first time in his life, made a silent vow to G-d.

"Master of the world, if we make it out of this hellhole alive, I promise to lay *tefillin* each day!"

All too soon it was over. By a miracle, the Egyptians were rebuffed. After they had fled, the damage was assessed, and it was found that all but one soldier had escaped injury: the soldier who had made a vow to G-d.

He had lost an arm.

His arm, upon which *tefillin* are wrapped . . .

He was broken. This was too much to bear. Could G-d be mocking him?

The faith he had recently discovered threatened to disappear.

He visited many rabbis with his question. How could G-d take the very arm with which he had hoped to bind himself to Him?

The answers he was given didn't satisfy him, and he sank into despair.

All of that changed at a late-night meeting with the Rebbe.

**How could G-d take the very arm with which he had hoped to bind himself to Him?**

The soldier told the Rebbe his story. Together, they cried.

The Rebbe then gently said, “Perhaps this was G-d’s way of telling you that His relationship with you is unconditional. He loves you not for what you may or may not do, but as you are. Like a parent loves his child . . .”

It was then that his wound began to heal.

## A Fatherly King

Is G-d our father, or is He our King?

Jewish prayers seem to imply that both are the case. G-d is called both *avinu*, “our Father,” and *malkeinu*, “our King.”

But how can He be both? One relationship is unconditional, while the other seems not to be. A parent loves his child whether or not he performs,<sup>2</sup> while the relationship between ruler and subject is based on loyalty and rules.<sup>3</sup>

The answer is: There’s *who* G-d is, and there’s *what* G-d does. And reciprocally, there’s *who we are* and there’s *what we do*.

The parent-child relationship<sup>4</sup> describes our essence; the king-subject association shows us how to express that essence.

Open up a prayerbook, and your heart will be warmed as you note that *avinu* always comes before *malkeinu*.

This fundamental idea is captured in the opening verse—and word—of Leviticus.

“He called to Moses, and G-d spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying . . .”

Why doesn’t the first verse identify who it is that is speaking to Moses? Why is the caller ID blocked?

Also, what is the difference between “calling” and “speaking,” and why did G-d choose to do both?

Rashi explains: “Every time G-d communicated with Moses, it was always preceded by G-d calling to Moses by name, for calling is an expression of affection.”

In the first words of the verse, G-d declares His love for the Jew. Only then does He express the desire for something to be done.

In G-d’s books, it turns out, pleasure comes before business.

**The parent-child relationship describes our essence; the king-subject association shows us how to express that essence**

Therefore, in the first words, which describe G-d as He is, as a father in love with His children, G-d is nameless, for a name limits and is external to the essence. Only subsequently is He called G-d, which describes what it is that He does.

## The Fine Print

This idea sheds light on a literary peculiarity in the first word of Leviticus: *vayikra*, “He called.” The word’s last letter, an *aleph*, is written in small print.

This is far from a typo. The message is profound.<sup>5</sup> “The small aleph is an allusion to the custom that small children traditionally begin their studies with the book of Leviticus.”<sup>6</sup>

But shouldn’t Genesis be the genesis of education? Why not start at the beginning of the story?

Because “He called to Moses,” which highlights G-d’s unconditional love for the Jew, *is* the beginning of the story!

## The Bridge to Infinity

Which raises the question: what is the basis for this unconditional love? From whence this intrinsic bond between the finite Jew and the infinite Creator?

Said Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi in his Tanya<sup>7</sup>: “Every Jew has a piece of G-d in them, *literally!*”

The word “literally” at the end of this revolutionary statement wasn’t added for dramatic effect,<sup>8</sup> but was meant to be taken literally!

**Where does the Torah fit into this family relationship?**

As such, one can even say that we are not connected to G-d as a subject is connected to his king, and we are not even attached to G-d as a child is attached to her parent, for we are one with G-d as a person is one with himself!

## Bookkeepers

But where does the Torah fit into this family relationship?

Shouldn’t our connection to the Master of the World hinge on the level of our devotion to His service? Does not the observance of the Torah’s commandments define the relationship between its giver and taker?

Are we not known as the “people of the book,” and rightfully so—are we not a people only because of the Book?<sup>9</sup>

But consider a child who was forcibly taken from its parents at birth, having never met its father or mother. Both the child and the parents possess a storehouse of love for each other, but do not know how or where to direct

it. An entire lifetime can go by this way, with their love unexpressed.

The Torah helps facilitate that expression.

Through connecting our will and behavior with G-d's Will, the intrinsic love which is our birthright comes to the fore.

In other words, there's being in love with G-d, and then there's telling Him that.

How appropriate that the mystics, in a fit of Divine romance, reinterpreted the word *mitzvah*, adding to the conventional meaning—"commandment"—the unconventional but deeper meaning "connection."

## No Way Out

This might explain a core Jewish principle I have long puzzled over.

"A Jew, even if he sins [by converting to another religion<sup>10</sup>], remains a Jew."<sup>11</sup>

During the early 1960s, Daniel Rufeisen, a Jewish convert to Catholicism who became a monk, decided to test the outer limits of this religious principle. Rufeisen, or "Brother Daniel" as he is commonly known, immigrated to Israel and applied for citizenship under the Law of Return, which guarantees any Jew the right to become an Israeli citizen upon request. Rufeisen argued that although he was a Catholic by religion, he was still a member of the Jewish people. Ironically, while the Israeli Supreme Court rejected his application, the Rabbinate ruled that the priest should be given citizenship as a Jew, based on the above Talmudic principle. As he was born to Jewish parents, his fate was with his people, regardless of any decisions he had made along the way.

Am I missing something?

According to Wikipedia, "religion" can be defined as follows: "A system of human thought which usually includes a set of narratives, symbols, beliefs, and practices that give meaning to the practitioner's experiences of life through reference to a higher power, deity or deities, or ultimate truth."

And wouldn't that be subject to every individual's discretion? How can I possibly be tied to a set of values and ideals I choose to reject? How can one remain a part of Judaism even if one wants out?

That's because Judaism is not the name of a religion, but the name of a family.

On a lighter note: American banker Otto Kahn, who was Jewish by birth, converted to Christianity. He was once walking with a hunchbacked friend when they passed a synagogue.

"You know I used to be a Jew," Kahn said.

**As he was born to Jewish parents, his fate was with his people, regardless of any decisions he had made along the way**

“And I used to be a hunchback,” his companion replied.<sup>12</sup>

## What’s in It for Me?

Imagine there was someone in the world who loved and supported you every single moment of your life, whenever and however?

Stop imagining.

G-d does.

### FOOTNOTES

1. Talmud, Berachot 10a.
2. This relates to the following Midrash (Tanna d’Vei Eliyahu Rabbah, chapter 14): “Two things preceded G-d’s creation of the world: Torah and Israel. Still, I do not know which preceded which. But when Torah states, ‘Speak to the children of Israel . . .,’ ‘Command the children of Israel . . .,’ and so on, I know that Israel preceded all.”
3. See, however, Sefer ha-Sichot 5750, pp. 378–388, where the Rebbe explains that even within the king-subject relationship there are two dimensions, one essential and the other performance-based. The idea is based on the Mechilta and Yalkut Shimoni, Yitro 20:3, “Accept My kingship, and afterwards I will give you decrees.” Apparently, accepting G-d’s kingship has inherent value even before any talk of decrees.
4. Scripture refers to the Jewish people as G-d’s children numerous times. See, for example, [Exodus 4:22](#) and [Hosea 11:1](#). See also Likkutei Sichot, vol. 21, pp. 20–26.
5. See Kli Yakar ad loc.
6. See also the Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 7:3), which states, “Why do we initiate young children with the Torah portion that speaks of sacrifices? Because just like the sacrifices are pure, so too are the young children.” The deeper meaning behind the Midrash is that both children and sacrifices illustrate G-d’s unconditional love for His people. In the case of children this is obvious, since they have no qualities and spiritual/religious accomplishments yet by which to earn G-d’s love. This proves that the nature of G-d’s love is unconditional. Sacrifices which are brought to atone for sin communicate the same message. For what can connect G-d to an adult sinner, who is old enough to know right from wrong, if not His unconditional love which embraces and accepts the Jew as he is?  
  
Incidentally, the latter point regarding sacrifices, that they underscore the essential connection of a Jew to G-d, reveals the thread which runs throughout this week’s Torah reading, from its beginning to its end. Namely, that G-d’s relationship with the Jew is not dependent on observance.
7. Chapter 2.

8. That would be out character for Rabbi Schneur Zalman, whose every word was exact and calculated. Indeed, it is said that he once spent six weeks deliberating regarding the insertion of a single letter!
9. As R. Saadiah Gaon said, “Our nation is only a nation because of the Torah.”
10. See Teshuvot Rashi.
11. Talmud, Sanhedrin 44a.
12. Based on the Rebbe’s talks, Likkutei Sichot vol. 7, pp. 24–26; vol. 22, pp. 1–6.

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